

Weaving from the Margins: An Ecofeminist Critique of The Song of the Weaving Women

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Abstract

This study employs ecofeminism as a theoretical framework to examine its applicability and critical value within Okinawan regional literature. Emerging in the latter half of the twentieth century, ecofeminism aims to expose the shared objectification and oppression of nature and women under patriarchal systems and capitalist logic at the ideological level. It emphasizes the construction of an ecological ethics centered on coexistence, cooperation, and local knowledge. Okinawa, positioned at the geographic and cultural margins of Japan's national narrative, with its unique colonial history, military trauma, and cultural heterogeneity, endows its literature with potent criticality and decentering potential. Centering on Kishaba Naoko's *The Song of the Weaving Women* as the primary text, this study focuses on the literary representation of binary oppositions within the work and explores ways to deconstruct traditional logocentric thinking. Through analysis of female embodied experience, local ecological knowledge, and cultural practices, it seeks ethical pathways beyond binary oppositions toward harmonious coexistence. The research concludes that the text not only offers a systematic critique of modernity's discourse structures but also, from an ecofeminist perspective, exemplifies a reimagining of ecological ethics and cultural subjectivity in regional literature.

Keywords

Ecofeminism; Okinawan literature; local ecological knowledge

1. Introduction

Ecofeminism, as a critical theory merging environmental ethics and gender politics, emphasizes revealing the simultaneous oppression of nature and women under patriarchal capitalist systems, pointing out how binary structures and logocentrism reinforce the objectification and marginalization of both nature and women at the ideological level. It calls for the construction of an ecological ethical system that transcends the traditional framework of modernity through diverse collaboration, symbiosis, and the recognition of local knowledge. Okinawa, as a geographically and culturally marginal region within Japan's national narrative, has experienced pro-

found cultural ruptures and ecological crises due to its unique colonial history, war-time traumas, and ongoing military occupation. This dual historical and contemporary predicament endows Okinawan literature with strong critical tension and decentralizing potential, making it a typical area for studying the practical application of ecofeminist theory. Kishaba Naoko's *The Song of the Weaving Women* centers on the life experiences of three generations of women, providing insights into the complex interweaving of traditional binaries and constructing a narrative structure that resists logocentric thinking. From an ecofeminist perspective, this paper explores how the text deconstructs binaries, reveals structural oppression, and, through language, narrative, and ethical practice, critiques and transcends ecological and gendered oppression, highlighting the unique value of regional literature in reconstructing ecological ethics and cultural subjectivity.

2. The Intersection of Ecofeminism and Okinawan Literary Expression

Ecofeminism was first proposed by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 in her work *Feminism or Death*. Its core idea is that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are not isolated phenomena, but stem from the systematic logic of domination inherent in the same patriarchal structure. This theory critiques the patriarchal society's binary opposition structures, such as culture versus nature and male versus female, pointing out that this dualistic model not only imposes culture and reason on men while assigning nature and sensibility to women, but also legitimizes the domination and exploitation of the "Other" through hierarchical valuation. Within this framework, women and nature are devalued as chaotic, irrational beings that need to be controlled, thereby providing ideological support for ecological destruction and gender oppression. Ecofeminism calls for the construction of an alternative social order that emphasizes cooperation, symbiosis, intuition, and holism, advocates respecting the intrinsic value of nature, and highlights the interconnectedness of various marginalized experiences, particularly the interactions among gender, racial, and class oppressions.

On the margins of Japan's national narrative, Okinawa exhibits a strong sense of regional culture and resistance consciousness through its unique historical experiences. Since its annexation by Japan in 1879, Okinawa has long faced systematic pressures of linguistic, cultural, and identity assimilation. The Battle of Okinawa in 1945 caused massive civilian casualties and ecological destruction, and the subsequent prolonged U.S. military presence brought far-reaching issues such as land requisition, environmental pollution, and changes to social structures, keeping the Okinawan experience of survival perpetually under the shadow of colonial governance. This historical context endows Okinawan literature with a distinctive critical and resistant quality, with narratives often focused on issues such as language loss, cultural discontinuity, war trauma, and ecological crises, questioning the homoge-

nizing logic of Japan's mainstream national ideology. For instance, Medoruma Shun's *Droplets* (1997) and *Sound of the Wind* (2004) explore multiple layers of wartime memory through magical realism and open-ended structures; Sakiyama Tami's *Waterway Travel* (1989) uses dialect to convey the confusion surrounding Okinawan identity; and Matayoshi Eiki's *The Pig's Retribution* (1995) reveals the complex identity mechanisms of local culture through island rituals. From this, it is evident that Okinawan literature is not only a writing of local culture but also a form of knowledge resistance and ecological ethical practice directed toward central power discourses, with its critical traits providing important intellectual soil and narrative foundations for the localization of marginalized theories such as ecofeminism.

At the intersection of theoretical demands and narrative practice, ecofeminism and Okinawan literature demonstrate a high degree of complementarity. Although they start from different standpoints, both focus on the bodily experiences and local knowledge of marginalized groups, questioning the hierarchies of reason over everything, center versus periphery, and self versus other within modern discourses. Ecofeminism, by revealing the structural oppression shared by women and nature, offers new theoretical perspectives for understanding the destruction of natural landscapes, the objectification of women's bodies, and the colonial traumas of local culture depicted in Okinawan literature. At the same time, Okinawan literature, through its dual writing of ecology and memory, reciprocally enriches ecofeminist theory concerning locality and intersecting forms of oppression. Introducing ecofeminism into Okinawan literary studies helps deepen the understanding of the complex relationships between gender, nature, and politics within the texts and broadens the avenues for exploring ecological justice and the construction of cultural subjectivity.

3. Systematic Presentation of Binary Oppositions in *The Song of the Weaving Women*

Kishaba Naoko's *The Song of the Weaving Women* was published in 1985. The work, written from a female perspective, explores local history and ecological experiences, and won the 11th New Okinawa Literary Prize. Since then, author Kishaba Naoko has emerged in the field of Okinawan literature. In 1990, the work was included in Volume 9 (Novels 4) of the Complete Collection of Okinawan Literature, alongside representative works by authors such as Medoruma Shun and Sakiyama Tami, further establishing its important place in the tradition of Okinawan local literature. Later, as one of the key texts in the chapter *Women and Independence*, it was incorporated into Okamoto Yoshinori's *Okinawan Self-Writing under the Reflection of Modern Literature* (1996), a leading study in modern literature research. As literature of the 1980s, it was included in Part Three of Ochiai Sadao's *History of Modern Okinawan Literature* (2022). This study believes that by depicting the life experiences of three generations of Okinawan women, the work profoundly reveals the

widely existing multiple dualistic structures in modern society through a unique female perspective. It is precisely this literary expression that combines local historical writing with universal social concern that makes *Song of the Weaving Woman* an one of the key texts to understand the developmental trajectory of Okinawan literature.

3.1. The Relationship Between Humans and Nature: Land Exploitation and Ecological Imbalance

The novel uses metaphorical techniques to depict the gradual dispossession of land resources against the backdrop of colonization and modernization, constructing an implicit picture of ecological oppression. Rather than directly criticizing colonial power or employing grand historical narratives, the work presents the silent exploitation of the ecological environment amid social structural changes through subtle contrasts in topographical transformations and land use practices. The text describes, "The land on both sides of the road has now mostly become sugarcane fields or thatched grasslands, but in the past, it was a fertile countryside covered with golden waves of rice," an imagery that conveys, layer by layer, the structural transformation from traditional rice-cultivation culture to capitalist commercial agriculture. The golden waves of rice symbolize a self-sustaining agricultural system centered on rice culture, emphasizing recycling, community sharing, and ecological moderation; whereas the sugarcane fields and thatched grasslands suggest a commercial agricultural system oriented mainly toward single-export production, underpinned by the colonial economic exploitation and reorganization of Okinawa's natural resources.

At the same time, the work further reveals the ecological trauma and survival challenges Okinawa endured under war and military colonization. *The Song of the Weaving Women* does not stop at a pastoral nostalgia for nature; it interweaves depictions of the expropriation of land resources and militarized restructuring carried out by Japan and the U.S. military administration, highlighting the breakdown of the ecosystem under the logic of the war machine: GMC trucks and Black accidents symbolize not only the deprivation of individual life through colonial violence, but also metaphorically the destruction of the relationship between laboring bodies and the land. The construction of military facilities and the large-scale felling of Ryukyu pines, resulting in soil erosion, clearly point to the disruption of ecological chains and the depletion of the land's vitality. These scenes demonstrate that war is not merely a moment of violent action, but a long-term destruction that profoundly impacts local natural systems and livelihoods, turning land that was once capable of nurturing life into a manageable resource for military needs.

3.2. Gender Structure: Patriarchy and the Systematic Control of Women's Bodies

Through the life narratives of three generations of women, Kishaba Naoko depicts the historical trajectory of patriarchal control over women's bodies in Okinawan society, revealing how the “nature—woman—oppressed” structure emphasized by ecofeminism manifests in different historical contexts.

The grandmother, representing the first generation, has her subjectivity completely erased by being set as nameless and without identity. In a patriarchal society centered on family hierarchy, she was sold to a brothel by her father at the age of ten, her body becoming a commodity to alleviate the family's financial burden, and later redeemed to ensure her sister could marry with dignity. Her body is repeatedly functionalized and objectified by both family and society, deeply reflecting the projection of systemic violence onto women's bodies. In the second generation, her mother experiences the dual oppression of wartime violence and patriarchal control. Due to her family mistakenly believing her first husband had died in war, she was forced to remarry her deceased husband's brother, completely deprived of emotional choice, her body again serving as a tool to maintain family lineage. Even more severe, she suffered sexual violence from the Japanese military, transforming her body in the wartime context into a symbolic site of military conquest, highlighting the focus of ecofeminism on critiquing gendered violence in war. In the third generation, Yuki, although living in a superficially free modern society, cannot escape the dual discipline of patriarchy and capitalist logic. In the workplace, she is brought into social gatherings under the label of female presence, her body alienated as gender capital within a consumerist context; when she loses functionality due to an accidental pregnancy, she is swiftly rejected by the system. The indifferent questioning by hospital doctors, asking whether her husband agrees, exposes that even within modern medical systems, women's bodies are still not entirely free from structural control that requires authorization by others. Clearly, from the grandmother being sold, the mother being remarried, to Yuki being displayed, the bodily fate of these three generations of women forms a historical chain from 'being used' to being disciplined, reflecting the continuous alienation and control of female bodies under patriarchal society and capitalist order.

4. Decentering: Discourse Reconstruction and Value Critique in Narrative Strategies

Under the dominance of traditional binary thinking, things are often divided into opposing structures such as primary and secondary, high and low, rational and emotional. This value system is deeply influenced by Logocentrism. Logos' refers to reason and speech, and in the Western philosophical tradition, it occupies an absolutely central position. Traditional literary theory centers on rational discourse, emphasizing authority and hierarchy, while ecofeminism opposes this dualism, advocating pluralistic, decentralized ecological and gender justice. In *The Song of the Weaving Women*, Kishaba Naoko employs multiple narrative strategies to literarily

deconstruct the dominant discourse system in the context of modernity, revealing profound reflections on the logic of capitalist development, traditional social norms, and hierarchical power structures.

4.1. The Democratization of Language: A Deconstruction of Logocentrism

Kishaba Naoko strategically uses plain language that closely mirrors reality in her novels and incorporates a large amount of Okinawan dialect. This approach not only creates a strong regional cultural atmosphere but also carries clear implications of decentralization, thereby powerfully challenging the authority of traditional literary discourse. Her language strategy primarily reflects the following three meanings: First, the introduction of dialect breaks the central position of standard language. In the context of mainstream Japanese culture, standard language represents orthodoxy and authority, while regional dialects are often seen as marginal or other. Kishaba Naoko places the Okinawan dialect at the core of the text, weakening this linguistic hierarchy and giving a voice to marginalized cultural subjects, demonstrating a strong resistance to logocentrism. Here, dialect is not only a communication tool but also a symbolic resource for constructing cultural identity and historical memory. Secondly, the everyday nature of the language brings the text closer to reality. The author abandons elegant rhetoric and abstract expressions, instead employing concrete, plain language to depict women's daily life scenes, such as agrarian and household labor, authentically presenting the survival experiences of Okinawan women. This mode of expression breaks the 'elite discourse' barrier in literature, enhancing readers' empathy and achieving social acknowledgment and cultural empowerment of suppressed female voices. Thirdly, this linguistic practice reflects the pluralism and decentralization advocated by ecofeminism. Ecofeminism opposes singular narratives and hierarchical discourse, emphasizing diversity, justice, and local wisdom. Kishaba Naoko further undermines the absolute authority of the narrative by weakening the 'single subject' in the story and employing fragmented, impersonal, and nonlinear narrative techniques, constructing a polyphonic, non-central narrative structure. This writing practice not only pushes the boundaries of literary form but also carries a profound critique of discursive hegemony and central culture.

4.2. The Deconstruction of Space, Culture, and the Logic of Class Domination

The narrative depth of *Song of the Weaving Woman* implicitly contains a systematic critique of Japan's modern national discourse, particularly the spatial hierarchy, mechanisms of cultural marginalization, and structures of class oppression it constructs. Kishaba Naoko, through literary representation of Okinawa's marginal geographic space, reveals the spatial violence and cultural oppression concealed by

mainstream national narratives, while also showing how marginalized subjects resist central logic through physical labor and local cultural practices.

From the perspective of spatial politics, Okinawa, as Japan's southern islands, became a key U.S. military base area after the war, representing a zone that could be sacrificed under the national security discourse. This military colonization has led to ecological damage, increased dependence of the local economy, and has subjected Okinawans, especially women, to the dual pressures of spatial violence and survival challenges. The living spaces depicted in 'Song of the Weaving Woman' are clearly distinct from urban centers; Yambaru, which serves as the backdrop for the text, is a life environment far from centers of power, characterized by a slow pace and close connection with nature. This non-central spatiality similarly provides marginal subjects with the possibility to resist the logic of the center.

5. Harmonious Coexistence from the Perspective of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminist literature should be a form of literature that integrates an ecological holistic awareness from a female perspective, possessing its own ecological ethics and gender ethics. It focuses on ecological equality, advocates interpersonal equality, emphasizes intergenerational justice, strives for racial justice, and seeks harmony between humans and nature, humans and the world, and humans among themselves. This theoretical stance essentially points to a non-binary holistic perspective, highlighting the interdependence and ethical co-construction of all things. Its conceptual approach echoes Steinbeck's assertion, "I am greater than the sum of my cells," embodying the idea of the collective human, meaning the collective depends on individuals yet differs from them, just as human beings as individuals depend on the cells that comprise them while remaining independent of those cells; the human collective is not the same as the individual humans that compose it. From an ecofeminist perspective, nature and society, women and the collective, are no longer isolated entities but intertwined within a dynamically connected web of life. Only when all components of the system cooperate and flourish together can this organic whole develop in a sustainable, stable, and resilient manner.

5.1. Harmony between humans and nature

The novel begins by introducing the Yambaru Road, an important route to northern Okinawa that carries both traffic and goods, creating an ecological space where humans and nature are approachable, perceptible, and able to engage in dialogue. The description of natural landscapes along the route not only fosters an atmosphere in which humans can converse with nature, but also symbolically initiates a literary reflection on the wholeness of the local ecosystem. In this depiction, natural scenery is not merely a backdrop, but becomes an active narrative partner, guiding readers into a narrative space that emphasizes symbiosis and ethics. Within this spatial framework, characters can sense the vastness of the ocean, the depth of the moun-

tains, and the richness of the forests. This macro-level perception of natural features expresses human respect and understanding of nature while reflecting humanity's position and role within the ecosystem. Through this setting, the text highlights the diversity and integrity of the local ecosystem and lays the groundwork for the narrative theme of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

This extension of the spiritual relationship between humans and nature is further manifested in the interaction between local practices and the female body. After having a quarrel with her mother, Yuki, filled with remorse, runs alone to the 'sacred house' at the back of the village, a space with sacred symbolism and a function as psychological refuge. This action generates a deep resonance between the natural landscape and the character's inner state. Scenes such as climbing the hundred-step stone staircase, overlooking the village and river, and standing in a square surrounded by ancient pines reinforce the symbolic role of nature as a container of memory and a mediator of emotions. Traditional rituals and female-led practices also form key channels for spiritual interaction between humans and nature. The regionally distinctive Usu Daiko drum, an important ritual performance in northern Okinawan village societies, serves not only for prayers, warding off evil, and expressing gratitude to nature, but also profoundly illustrates how women, through their bodies, voices, and movements, participate in the reproduction of the ecological spiritual order. The rhythm of drums, dance, and chorus creates a system of bodily practices embedded in natural rhythms, while the coordination, guidance, and sensitivity displayed by women further establish their cultural role as agents of ecological ethics. This process indicates that nature is no longer a passive object but a responsive, perceivable spiritual existence; women, as perceivers and mediators, establish an ecological ethic grounded in bodily experience and symbolic action.

5.2. Equality among people

From the ethical perspective of equality for all, *The Song of the Weaving Women* constructs a decentralized and non-authoritative family structure through the daily communication and emotional interactions among women of different generations. This structure effectively breaks the traditional patriarchal model of family hierarchy based on gender and age, undermining the generational logic where 'elders monopolize the discourse of experience while the younger generation passively accepts it,' and instead presents an ethical relationship centered on understanding, empathy, and mutual respect.

The novel highlights the equalization of narrative authority in the way life wisdom is conveyed. The grandmother, as the eldest member of the family, possesses rich life experience and memories of war, yet she does not dominate the younger generation through admonishment or moral instruction. Instead, she shares historical traumas with a calm and inclusive demeanor. In the novel, she repeats the phrase 'It's all the war's fault' twice. This act serves both as an emotional anchor for war memories

and as a statement of trauma with significant political implications. This seemingly repetitive expression does not establish knowledge authority; rather, its openness and repetition leave room for understanding and engagement, forming a non-hierarchical, negotiable structure for sharing memories. Consequently, the family no longer functions as a mechanism for transmitting a single perspective of memory but becomes an emotional space where different subjects can equally participate and collaboratively write historical experiences. Moreover, the grandmother's resolute statement, 'The people of Okinawa will never choose to commit suicide, no matter what, they will live with resilience,' profoundly reflects the perseverance and cultural resistance of the Okinawan people under multiple oppressions. This refusal of self-destruction and indomitable stance not only embodies a deep recognition of coexistence with nature, but also achieves the organic transmission of life wisdom and ethical values across generations.

Secondly, this ethical structure is also reflected in the non-hierarchical transmission of traditional crafts. Grandmother taught Yuki the craft of banana fiber weaving not through prescriptive instruction but through shared embodied practice and tacit experience, accomplishing a natural transfer of knowledge and values. In Yuki's recollection, weaving was not merely productive labor but a form of life activity resonating in harmony with nature, the land, and time. This form of transmission breaks the 'experience-reproduction' model of technical knowledge; it is an ecological ethical system built on equal perception and shared experiential presence. It emphasizes the collaboration between body and nature, the integration of labor and emotion, enabling intergenerational interaction to transcend power hierarchies and move toward equal respect for labor wisdom and ecological awareness.

A deeper ethical shift is evident in the scenes of women's gatherings depicted in the novel. Upon returning to her village, Yuki joins a communal meal with local women, where the novel presents a space autonomously constructed by women, free from male-dominated social order. In this temporary but symbolically rich 'female public sphere,' traditional divisions based on age, status, or marital condition are intentionally softened; each woman's voice is equally accepted, and every narrative is listened to with respect. This mode of communication not only breaks the power barriers of male-centric public discourse but also aligns with ecofeminism's principles of 'non-domination' and 'mutual co-existence.' In this space, women's experiences of trauma can be openly expressed and interconnected, no longer classified as victims but integrated into a narrative ethical network based on empathy, healing, and memory restoration. The sharing of traditional Okinawan cuisine not only fosters a cultural-emotional community but also enables women to reconstruct their own and each other's sense of life within relationships of equality.

6. Concluding remarks

Kishaba Naoko's *The Song of the Weaving Women* is not only a narrative of the lives

of local women but also a profound political text responding to ecological crises and cultural marginalization. Through the life trajectories of three generations of weaver women, the novel reveals how capitalism and patriarchy, through land expropriation, control over women's bodies, and cultural dehistoricization, exert structural violence on nature, women, and marginalized groups. The silent labor of the weaver women not only presents a non-industrialized, non-commodified mode of existence but also constitutes a miniature resistance to the logic of modernity. Their labor, embedded in the rhythms of nature, reliant on local knowledge, and sustained through bodily memory, not only continues traditional ecological wisdom but also positions women as practitioners and witnesses of ecological ethics.

In terms of language and narrative structure, the novel employs dialect writing, vernacular speech, and nonlinear narrative strategies, dismantling the power order established by Logocentrism and granting marginalized subjects narrative agency. Practices such as weaving, drumming, and ritual conduction, rooted in women's bodily experiences and engagement with nature, are repeatedly foregrounded in the text, re-centering women's labor from marginalized culture to the ethical core. This narrative practice not only expands the theoretical boundaries of ecofeminism regarding ecological justice and knowledge democratization but also offers Okinawan literature a literary path to break the mechanisms of othering.

The ecofeminist principles of ethics of symbiosis, intersectional oppression, and decentralization are concretely presented and deeply practiced in *The Song of the Weaver Women*. By intertwining ecological narrative with bodily experience, the text tightly fuses personal trauma with collective memory as well as natural ecology with social structure, expressing resistance in silence and hope in the subtle details. Thus, ecofeminism not only serves as an effective theoretical approach for understanding Okinawan literature but also provides an enlightening literary model for constructing a framework of ecological justice rooted in nature, the body, and local experience.

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